

From tragedy in Vietnam

What were Willson's reasons?

By Judy Ronningen
Staff writer

CONCORD — S. Brian Willson was on the tracks at the Concord Naval Weapons Station Tuesday because of what he had seen nearly 20 years ago in Vietnam, friends say.



Liteky

Willson was the only one seriously hurt Tuesday, but he was just one of many at the tracks willing to risk arrest, to fast until they were close

to death, or to give days or months of their time to the anti-war cause.

Why do they do it?

Many demonstrators say they were motivated by parents who held strong beliefs and acted on them, combined with their own gradual learning about Central America.

For Willson, friends say images of burned-out Vietnamese villages and homeless peasants led him to oppose, with increasing vehemence, what he perceived as another Vietnam in Central America.

He resigned as director of the Vietnam Veterans Outreach Center "and began a series of trips to see for myself. I have subsequently been to Nicaragua four times and El Salvador and Honduras once each," he said in a letter to the commander of the Naval Weapons Station last month.

The war victims that he saw led to him to escalate his protest into a 36-day fast last September, with three other veterans, on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

That fall he founded the Veterans Peace Action Team, a Santa Cruz-based group aimed at taking people from other veterans peace groups to Central America. It is supported by donations.

"Brian's vision was of a peace army that would go to war zones and interpose ourselves" in front of the civilians, said his friend, Scott Rutherford, also a veteran. It evolved into a 77-mile trek last March through the northern war zones of Nicaragua.

What he saw on those trips made him vow to block the tracks where he believed weapons for El Salvador and the Nicaraguan Contras were shipped from Concord.

David Hartsough, 47, of San Francisco, helped organize the non-violent sit-in on the tracks that began Tuesday. He works for the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker group, and helped found the Nuremberg Action peace group.

For him, non-violent action began in 1966, when he went with his minister father to a bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala.

"I was 15. We went down and saw most of the churches that had been bombed, and people walking to work.

"And Martin Luther King saying 'We have to love the people doing this to us.' It moved the conscience of the nation — and that's our job here.

"Montgomery made me look beyond what I learned in school, and see that people can do something to change it," he said.

Sydney Vilen, 46, of San Bruno took a month off from her job driving limousines to sit outside the



DAVID HARTSOUGH speaks on We

weapons station every day, holding signs that read: "These Weapons Kill People in El Salvador" and "Respect the Navy: Question the Weapons."

Vilen was 8 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. During World War II, she remembers her parents, "who so strongly believed in this country and democracy, saying: 'Why did the people of Germany let it happen?'"

She started actively opposing Reagan administration policies in 1982: she was injured, unable to work and turned down for disability because of cutbacks "directly relat-

Chronology of the week's events

Here's a chronicle of the week's events surrounding protests at the Concord Naval Weapons Station leading up to the Saturday demonstration attended by thousands of people.

Tuesday: Demonstrator S. Brian Willson, 45, of San Rafael, is struck by a munitions train as he sits on the tracks leading from the station to Port Chicago. As his horrified wife and stepson look on, Willson is injured in the head and his right leg was severed by the train. During eight hours of surgery, his left leg is also amputated below the knee. A trackside vigil that night draws 80 people.

dent Daniel Ortega calls Willson's family to express his sympathy. Willson's condition improves to serious and he is able to talk with his wife. The county Sheriff's Department continues its investigation of the incident. Four hundred people march in Berkeley in support of Willson.

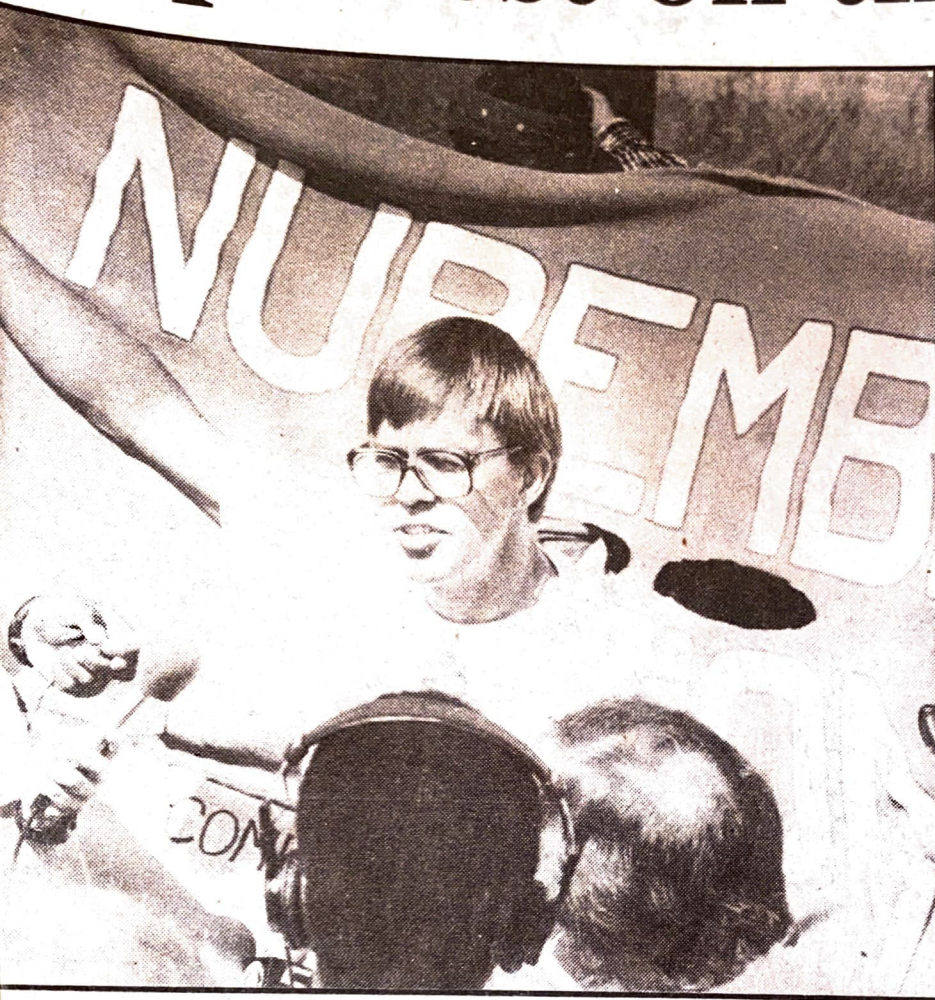
Thursday: Five people are arrested at the Naval Weapons Station when they block a truck labeled as carrying explosives. Rosario Murillo, common-law wife of the Nicaraguan president, announces she will fly to Concord and visit Willson.

Friday: The Navy begins its investigation into the maiming of

nounces he will speak at the Saturday rally in support of Willson. Five members of Congress, Reps. George Miller, D-Martinez; Ron Dellums, D-Berkeley; Barbara Boxer, D-Marin; Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco; and Fortney "Pete" Stark, D-Hayward, write a letter to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger asking for a review of safety procedures at military bases.

Saturday: A demonstration in honor of Willson draws 5,000 people to Clyde. The rally continues peacefully for four hours, but some demonstrators then rip out a section of track and cause an estimated \$10,000 damage. No arrests are made.

to protest on the tracks



Staff photo/Randy Becker

Wednesday, the day after S. Brian Willson was injured.

to the military buildup."

"When I heard about this (at Concord) I wanted to get involved," she recalled. She was at a point in her life where she couldn't be happy with herself unless she did get involved.

"Sure, I'd love to be swimming. Or surfing, or skiing," she said.

"I look at it and think, I have no family. I never married. If I had children at home who needed me, it would be different.

"If I can't do it — then who can?"

For Charlie Liteky, 56, of San Francisco, the transformation from everyday citizen to full-time activist came late in life.

The attitude of the former Catholic priest, Vietnam War chaplain and Congressional Medal of Honor winner started changing when he listened in 1984 to Salvadoran refugees who had fled to the Bay Area.

He began reading everything he could about Central America.

He was newly married, and "together, we were planning on doing all the things newly married people do. Get a house — maybe even a sailboat."

Instead, he quit his job, with his wife's blessing, and went to Central America to see the horror of the refugees' stories could possibly be true.

"I saw poor people being brutal-

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ized. I talked with survivors and families of people who disappeared, who were tortured and killed."

Liteky returned to San Francisco and began talking to any group that would listen. Then he moved to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress. When Congress approved Contra aid anyway, "I felt I had to escalate the protest."

"I thought, well, what do I have to give? All I have to give is my life — and this medal I had returned." He fasted 47 days on the Capitol steps, where he met Brian Willson.

Chuck Goodmacher, 27, director of the Mt. Diablo Peace Center, does his bit for the anti-war movement with a telephone, an office and a talent for organization.

He learned his peaceful ways right here in Walnut Creek, from parents who took him to demonstrations and from the Alexander Lindsay Junior Museum, which taught him a respect for life that stayed with him as an adult.

At age 10, he remembers going with his parents to see a film about Hiroshima. He recalls the patience and the openness of people in the local peace movement, when as a high school student he began organizing demonstrations.

Goodmacher studied public policy and worked in New York City's office of management and budget, but soon decided he couldn't influence the community from within government.

He doesn't plan on being peace center director forever, he says, but: "It feels like the right thing to do now."